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BY
GOLDWIN SMITH

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ENTERED AT STATIONERS' HALL

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PREFACE.

The letters collected in this volume appeared, with others, in the *New York Sun*, to the Editor of which the thanks of the writer for his courtesy are due.

Appended is a paper on the same subjects commenting on one by the late Mr. Chamberlain, since published in the *North American Review*. To the Editor of the *North American Review* also the writer's acknowledgments are due.

There appeared to be sufficient interest in the discussion to call for the publication of a small edition.

The age calls for religious truth. Nine thousand persons communicated their cravings to the Editor of the *London Daily Telegraph*. By their side the present writer places himself, not a teacher, but an inquirer, seeking for truth and open to conviction.

The position of the clergy, especially where tests are stringent, calls for our

utmost consideration. But I submit that it would not be improved by any attempt, such as seems to be made in a work of great ability before me, to merge the theological in the social question. Benevolence may still be far below the Gospel mark, and the Christian faith may suffer from its default. But the increase of it and the multiplication of its monuments since the world has been comparatively at peace cannot be denied; while of the distress which still calls for an increase of Christian effort, not the whole is due to default on the part of the wealthier classes. Idleness, vice, intemperance, improvident marriage, play their part. Let us not be led away upon a false issue.

There is nothing for it but truth.

I.

MAN, AND HIS DESTINY.

Time has passed since I first sought access to the columns of *The Sun*, ranging myself with the nine thousand who in an English journal had craved for religious light. The movement which caused that craving has gone on. The Churches show their sense of it. Even in that of Rome there is a growth of "Modernism," as it is called by the Pope, who, having lost his mediaeval preservatives of unity, strives to quell Modernism by denunciation. Anglicanism resorts to a grand pageant of uniformity, beneath which, however, lurk Anglo-Catholicism, Evangelicism, and Liberalism, by no means uniform in faith. The Protestant Churches proper, their spirit being more emotional, feel the doctrinal movement

less. But they are not unmoved, as they show by relaxation of tests and inclination to informal if not formal union, as well as by increasing the aesthetic and social attractions of their cult. Wild theosophic sects are born and die. But marked is the increase of scepticism, avowed and unavowed. It advances probably everywhere in the track of physical science. We are confronted with the vital question what the world would be without religion, without trust in Providence, without hope or fear of a hereafter. Social order is threatened. Classes which have hitherto acquiesced in their lot, believing that it was a divine ordinance and that there would be redress and recompense in a future state, are now demanding that conditions shall be levelled here. The nations quake with fear of change. The leaders of humanity, some think, may even find it necessary to make up by an increase of the powers of government for the lost influence of religion.

Belief in the Bible as inspired and God's revelation of himself to man seems

hardly to linger in well-informed and open minds. Criticism, history, and science have conspired to put an end to it. The authorship of the greater part, including the most important books, is unknown. The morality of the Old Testament differs from that of the New, and though in advance of the world generally in those days, in more places than one, as in the case of the slaughter of the Canaanites, shocks us now. There are errors, too, in the Old Testament of a physical kind, such as those in the account of creation and the belief in the revolution of the sun. Of the New Testament the most important books, the first three Gospels, our main authorities for the life of Christ, are manifestly grafts upon a stock of unknown authorship and date. They betray a belief in diabolical possession, a local superstition from which the author of the Fourth Gospel, who evidently was not a Palestinian Jew, was free. There is discrepancy between the first three Gospels and the fourth, notably as to the day and consequent significance of Christ's

celebration of the Passover. It is incredible that God in revealing himself to man should have allowed any mark of human error to appear in the revelation.

We have, moreover, to ask why that on which the world's salvation depended should have been withheld so long and communicated to so few.

There remains of the Old Testament, besides its vast historical interest, much that morally still impresses and exalts us. Of the New Testament there remains the moral ideal of Christ, our faith in which no uncertainty as to the authors of the narratives, or mistrust of them on account of the miraculous embellishment common in biographies of saints, need materially affect. The moral ideal of Christ conquered the ancient world when the Roman, mighty in character as well as in arms, was its master. It has lived through all these centuries, all their revolutions and convulsions, the usurpation, tyranny, and scandals of the Papacy. The most doubtful point of it, considered as a permanent exemplar, is its tendency, not to asceti-

cism, for Christ came “eating and drinking,” but to an excessive preference for poverty and antipathy to wealth which would arrest human progress and kill civilization. We have, however, a Nicodemus and a Joseph of Arimathea, as well as a Dives and a Lazarus. Nothing points to a Simeon Stylites. Self-denial, though not asceticism proper, is a necessary part of the life of a wandering preacher, which also precluded the exhibition of domestic virtues. The relation of Jesus with his family seems to have been hardly domestic; we have no record of any communication between him and Joseph; in his last hour he provides a retreat for his mother.

We cannot appeal from reason to faith. Faith is confidence, and for confidence there must be reason. The faith to which appeal is made is in fact an emotion rather than an intellectual conviction.

But apart from the Bible, have we any revelation of the nature, the will, the unity, the existence of deity? It must apparently be owned that, though we

tremble at the thought, we have none. We are left upon this shore of time gazing into infinity and eternity without clue or guidance except such as we can gain either by inspection of our own nature with its moral indications and promptings or by studying the order of the universe.

We find in man, it is true, a natural belief in deity, which we might think was implanted by his creator; but it is not found in all men, and in the lower races it assumes forms often so low and grotesque that we cannot imagine its origin to have been divine. Between the God of the Christian and the god of the red Indian there is, saving mere force, no affinity whatever. This we must frankly own to ourselves. The god of the Mexican demanded human sacrifice.

On earth the creative power seems to be, as it were, contending against itself. Good of every kind is in conflict with evil. Slowly and fitfully, with many reverses, good seems to prevail. Humanity as a whole advances, and if we could believe in its collective advance toward an ulti-

mate perfection which all who have contributed to the advance should share, we might have a solution of the great problem. But of this we have no certain assurance. Multitudes come into being who to progress can contribute nothing. There is evil of all kinds that so far as we can see can be followed by no good effect. Plague and famine, with a great part of the common misfortunes of human life, seem merely evil. So, plainly, do the sufferings of animals, sometimes on a terrible scale and apparently quite useless. As long as effort, even painful, is the price of perfection the price must be paid and we acquiesce. But in innumerable cases there appears to be no room for that explanation. The rocks display the fossil remains of whole races of primeval animals produced apparently only to become extinct. Of the earth itself, man's destined habitation, large portions are utterly uninhabitable. The legendary war between the powers of good and evil, God and Satan, Ormuzd and Ahriman, was a fable naturally

devised, though the birth of the two powers and the division of existence between them is inconceivable. Can anything like a clear line be drawn between good and evil?

Effort and resistance to temptation may seem necessary ingredients in the formation of a virtuous character. So far we may think we have the clue. But what is to be said of the myriads of cases in which virtuous effort seems to be morally impossible; in the case, for instance, of barbarous or corrupt and depraved tribes or nations in which general example is evil? What is to be said of deaths in infancy, when there has been no time for character to be formed? To suppose that the Creator could not have helped it, that this was his only way to the production of virtuous beings, is to deny his omnipotence. A Satan with horns and hoofs, struggling against the power of good, used to be the solution of the problem, but belongs to the simple religion of the past.

A plan of which we are ignorant, but of which the end will be good, is apparently

our only explanation of the mystery. The earth is beautiful; we have human society with all its interests; we have friendship, love, and marriage; we have art and music. We must trust that the power which will determine the future reveals itself in these.

The belief that man has an immortal soul inserted into a mortal body from which, being, as Bishop Butler phrases it, "indiscerptible," it is parted at death, has become untenable. We know that man is one; that all grows and develops together. Imagination cannot picture a disembodied soul. The spiritualist apparitions are always corporeal.

Free will surely we unquestionably have. Necessarianism seems to assume that in action there is only one element, motive. But reflection seems to show that there are two elements, motive and will; and of this duality we seem to be sensible when we waver in action or feel compunction for what we have done. Is it possible to explain moral repentance or morality at all without assuming the freedom of

the will? Habit may enslave; but to be enslaved is once to have been free.

What is conscience? When we repent morally are we looking only to the immediate consequences of the act, or are we also looking to the injury done to our moral nature? If the latter, does it not appear that there is something in us not material and pointing to a higher life? Much of us, no doubt, is material. Memory and imagination often act unbidden by the will; imagination often when we are asleep. We may find a material element even in the character as moulded by physical or social circumstance or need. But is there not also a conscious effort of self-improvement not dependent on these? That all is material, nothing spiritual, does not seem yet to have been proved.

It is by close examination of our own nature and its workings, perhaps, that we are most likely to solve the enigma of our being. The word spiritual surely has a meaning; it suggests self-culture not only for the present but for a higher state.

Evolution is a great discovery. But evolution cannot have evolved itself, nor does there seem to have been an observed case of it. Points of similarity between the ape and man are not proofs of transition. Has any animal given, like man, the slightest sign of self-improvement or conscious tendency to progress?

The putting on by the mortal of immortality, it must however be owned, baffles conception. In the *apologue of Dives and Lazarus* the dead appear still in their human forms and talk to each other across the gulf, apparently narrow, which divides the abode of the damned from that of the blessed. This clearly is the work of imagination. Nor, seeing the infinite gradations of character and the frequent mixture of good and evil in the same man, can we understand how a clear line can be drawn between those who are admitted to heaven and those who are condemned to hell.

Mere difficulties of sense or intellect on mundane questions might be met by appeal to the mysteries of a universe

which may conceivably be other in reality than to us it appears. But it is to be supposed that divine beneficence would give its creatures all powers of intelligence necessary to their moral welfare, above all those entailing reward or punishment in a future life.

What is to be said in this connection of man's æsthetic nature, of his sense of beauty and melody? Can they be the offspring of material evolution? As they meet no material need, we might almost take them for the smile of a beneficent and sympathizing spirit. The basis of the gifts no doubt is physical, but we cannot easily understand how they can have been developed by a purely physical process.

To ghosts and apparitions of all kinds, spiritualism included, we bid a long farewell.

We turn to the universe, of which while we believed in the Incarnation our earth was the central and all-important scene, but in which it now holds the place only of a minor planet. We see order and grandeur inexpressible, but with some

apparent signs of an opposite kind—the conflagration of a star, a moon bereft of atmosphere, errant comets and aerolites. In our own abode we have variations of weather, apparently accidental and sometimes noxious, atmospheric influences which beget plagues, ministers of destruction such as earthquakes and volcanoes. The plan, if plan there is, transcends our sense and comprehension.

Still, be it ever borne in mind, of the human race, progress, moral and mental, is the unique characteristic, and the one which suggests a divine plan to be fulfilled in the sum of things. It distinguishes man vitally and immeasurably from all other creatures. Fitful, often arrested, sometimes reversed, it does not cease. It may point to an ultimate solution of the enigma of our chequered being such as shall “justify the ways of God to man.” This may be still the world’s childhood, and the faith which seems to be collapsing may be only that of the child.

Whatever trouble, moral, social, or political, a great change of belief may

bring, there is surely nothing for it but to seek and embrace the truth. Whatever may become of our creeds and of the dogma, so plainly human in its origin, of some of them, we have still the Christian ideal of character, which has not yet been seriously challenged, does not depend on miracle or dogma for its claim to acceptance, and may continue to unite Christendom.

Superstition can be of no use morally; even politically it can be of little use, and not for long. In the Christian ideal we still have a rule of life. Robinson, the good Puritan pastor, taking leave of the members of his flock who were embarking for America, bade them not confine themselves to what they had learned from his teaching, but to "be ready to receive whatever truth might be made known to them from the written word of God." If there is a God, are not all truths, scientific, historic, or critical, as much as anything written in the Bible, the word of God?

September 20th, 1908.

II.

NEW FAITH LINKED WITH OLD.

A preacher cites a lecture of mine, delivered nearly half a century ago, a part of which has had the honour of being embalmed in the work of that most eminent theologian, the late Dean Westcott, on “The Historic Faith.” I turned rather nervously to the lecture to see what it was that I had said. Not that I should have been much shocked had I found that my opinions had even been completely changed. Since that lecture was delivered science and criticism have wrought a revolution in theological belief, likely, as it appears to me, to be regarded hereafter as the most momentous revolution in history. With the whole passage cited by Dean Westcott I will not burden the

columns of *The Sun*, but part of it is this:—

“The type of character set forth in the Gospel history is an absolute embodiment of love, both in the way of action and affection, crowned by the highest possible exhibition of it in an act of the most transcendent self-devotion to the interest of the human race. This being the case, it is difficult to see how the Christian morality can ever be brought into antagonism with the moral progress of mankind; or how the Christian type of character can ever be left behind by the course of human development, lose the allegiance of the moral world, or give place to newly emerging and higher ideals. This type, it would appear, being perfect, will be final. It will be final not as precluding future history, but as comprehending it. The moral efforts of all ages, to the consummation of the world, will be efforts to realize this character and to make it actually, as it is potentially, universal. While these efforts are being carried on under all the various circumstances of life and

society, and under all the various moral and intellectual conditions attaching to particular men, an infinite variety of characters, personal and national, will be produced ; a variety ranging from the highest human grandeur down to the very verge of the grotesque. But these characters, with all their variations, will go beyond their sources and their ideal only as the rays of light go beyond the sun. Humanity, as it passes through phase after phase of the historical movement, may advance indefinitely in excellence ; but its advance will be an indefinite approximation to the Christian type. A divergence from that type, to whatever extent it may take place, will not be progress, but debasement and corruption. In a moral point of view, in short, the world may abandon Christianity, but it can never advance beyond it. This is not a matter of authority, or even of revelation. If it is true, it is a matter of reason as much as anything in the world.”

I went on to dwell on the freedom of the Christian type of character as embodied in

the Founder of Christianity from peculiarities of nation, race, or sex which might have derogated from its perfection as a type of pure humanity. In those days I believed in revelation. But my argument was not from revelation, but from ethics and history. The undertaking of Christianity to convert mankind to a fraternal and purely beneficent type of character and enfold men in a universal brotherhood, baffled and perverted although the effort has been in various ways, appears to have no parallel in ethical history. There is none in the Greek philosophers or the Roman Stoics, high as some of them may soar in their way. Aristotle's ideal man is perfect in its statuesque fashion, but it is not fraternal; it is not even philanthropic. Nor does the Christian character or the effort to create it depart with belief in dogma. Do not men who have totally renounced the dogma still cultivate a character in its gentleness and benevolence essentially Christian?

Theory, I have none. I plead, on a footing with the nine thousand correspondents

of the *Daily Telegraph* of London, for thoroughgoing allegiance to the truth, emancipation of the clerical intellect from tests, and comprehension in the inquiry not only of the material, but of the higher or spiritual nature of man, including his aspiration to progress, of which there cannot be said to be any visible sign in brutes, whatever rudiments of human faculties and affections they may otherwise display. But though I have no theory, I cannot help having a conception, and my present conception of the historical relation of Christianity and its Founder to humanity and human progress does not seem to me to be so different from what it was half a century ago as when I came to compare the two I expected to find it. It seems to me still that history is a vast struggle, with varying success, toward the attainment of moral perfection, of which, if the advent of Christianity furnished the true ideal, it may be deemed in a certain sense a revelation. Assuredly it may if in this most mysterious world there is, beneath all the conflict

of good with evil, a spirit striving toward good and destined in the end to prevail. If there is not such a spirit, if all is matter and chance, we can only say, What a spectacle is History!

January 20th, 1907.

III.

THE SCOPE OF EVOLUTION.

In discussing the ground of ethical science some writers appear to hold that evolution explains all; but surely the illustrious discoverer of evolution never carried his theory beyond the material part of man. He never professed to trace the birth of ethics, idealization, science, poetry, art, religion, or anything spiritual in the anthropoid ape. There is here, apparently, not only a step in development but a *saltus mortalis*, a dividing and impassable gulf.

Our bodily senses we share with the brutes. Some brutes excel us in quickness of sense. They have the rudiments, but the rudiments only, of our emotions and affections. The mother bird loves her off-

spring, but only until they are fledged. The dog is attached to the master who feeds him, commands him, and if he offends whips him; but without respect to that master's personal character or deserts. He is as much attached to Bill Sykes as he would be to the best of men. The workings of what we call instinct in beavers, bees, and ants are marvellous and seem in some ways almost to outstrip humanity, but they are not, like humanity, progressive. The ant and the bee of thousands of years ago are the ant and the bee of the present day. The bee is not even taught by experience that her honey will be taken again next year. Still less is it possible to detect anything like moral aspiration or effort at improving the community in a moral way. Beavers are wonderfully co-operative, but they have shown no tendency to establish a church.

Of the science of ethics the foundation surely is our sense of the difference between right and wrong, and of our obligation to choose the right and avoid the wrong for our own sake and for the

sake of the society of which we are members and the character of which reacts upon ourselves. This sense seems to me to be authoritative, whatever its origin may be. Different conceptions of right and wrong may to some extent prevail under different circumstances, national or of other kinds, giving room for different ethical systems, as a comparison of the ethics of the Gospel with those of Aristotle shows. Still, there is always the sense of the difference between right and wrong and of the necessity, individual and social, of embracing the first and eschewing the second. If the Christian system is found by experience to show itself essentially superior to all other systems and to satisfy individually and socially, it is supreme, and is presumably the dictate of the author of our being, if an author of our being there is.

The necessarian theory, which in this connection is still advanced or implied, largely accepted as it has been, I cannot help thinking is really traceable to an oversight. If in action there were only

one factor, that is to say, the motive, the action would seem to be necessary and to be traceable in its origin apparently back to the nebula. But surely there are two factors, the motive and the volition. Of the second factor in actions which are matters of course we are not conscious; where there is a conflict of motives or hesitation of any kind, we are. Huxley at one time held that man was an automaton. I believe my illustrious friend afterward receded from that position. Yet on the necessarian theory automatons we must apparently be.

February 10th, 1907.

IV.

THE LIMIT OF EVOLUTION.

Your last correspondent on the subject of my letters treats the question lightly. Perhaps he is young, enjoying the morning of life and thinking little of its close. On the mind of a student of history is deeply impressed the sadness of its page; the record of infinite misery and suffering as well as depravity, all apparently to no purpose if the end is to be a physical catastrophe. Comtism, while it bids us devote and sacrifice ourselves to the future of humanity, can apparently hold out nothing more.

I accept evolution, if it is the verdict of science as to the origin of physical species, the human species included; though it certainly seems strange that, the chances

being so numerous as they are, no distinct case of evolution should have taken place within our ken. But the theory apparently does not pretend to account for the development of man's higher nature. That there is a gap in the continuity of development or any supernatural intervention has never been suggested by me; but it does appear that there is an ascent such as constitutes an essential difference and calls for other than physical explanation.

In matter, said Tyndall, is the potentiality of all life. Matter is what we discern by our bodily senses. What assurance have we that the account of the universe and of our relations to it given us by our bodily senses is exhaustive, or that the moral conscience may not have another source?

Apart from anything more distinctly spiritual, where do we get the faculty of idealization? Is it traceable to physical sense?

Unless the moral conscience has a source higher than mere physical evolution, what

is to deter a man in whom criminal propensities are strong from indulging them so long as he can do so with impunity? Eccelino had a lust of cruelty. Was he wrong in indulging it, so long as he had the power, which he might have had, with common prudence, to the end of his life?

I speak, as I have always said, from the ranks; and I am not presuming to criticise Darwin's theory as an explanation of the origin and nature of the physical man. But if the theory is to be carried farther, and we are to be told that man's higher attributes and his moral conscience have no source or authority other than physical evolution, we may fairly ask to see our way.

March 17th, 1907.



V.

EXPLANATIONS.

Interest is evidently felt in questions which I have been permitted to treat in *The Sun*, and after the notices and the queries which I have received there are points on which I should like, if you will allow me, to set myself right.

I. The leaning to orthodoxy with which I am gently reproached goes not beyond a conviction, drawn from the study not of theology but of history, that of all the types of character hitherto produced the Christian type, founded on a belief in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, appears to be the happiest and the best. At its birth it encountered alien and hostile influences; Alexandrian theosophy, Oriental asceticism, Byzantine imperial-

ism. Later it encountered the worst influence of all, that of theocracy engendered by the ambition of the monk Hildebrand. Theocracy, not Catholicism or anything spiritual, has been the source of the crimes of the Papacy; of the Norman raids upon England and Ireland; the civil wars kindled by Papal intrigue in Germany; the extermination of the Albigenses; the Inquisition; Alva's tribunal of blood in the Netherlands; the massacre of St. Bartholomew; the persecution of the Huguenots; Jesuitism and the evils, moral and political, as well as religious, which Jesuitism has wrought. Through all this, and in spite of it all, Christian character has preserved itself, and it is still the basis of the world's best civilization. Much that is far outside the Christian creed is still Christian in character and traceable to a Christian source.

II. I fully admit that society can be regulated by a law framed for mutual protection and general well-being without the religious conscience or other support than temporal interest. But if individual in-

terest or passion can break this law with impunity, as often they can, what is there to withhold them from doing it? What is the value of a clean breast?

III. The fatherhood of God seems to be implied in the Christian belief in the brotherhood of man. By that phrase I meant to characterise Christianity, not to embark upon the question of Theism. It does not seem possible that we should ever have direct proof through human observation and reasoning of the existence of Deity or of the divine aim and will. To some power, and apparently to some moral power, we must owe our being. We can hardly believe that creation planned itself or that the germ endowed itself with life and provision for development. But what can have been the aim of creation? What can have led to the production of humanity, with all the evil and suffering which Omniscience must have foreseen? What was there which without such a process mere fiat, so far as we can see, could not produce? The only thing that presents itself is character, which apparently

must be self-formed and developed by resistance to evil. We have had plenty of “evidences” in the manner of Paley or the Bridgewater Treatises, met by sceptical argument on the other side; but has inquiry yet tried to fathom the mystery of human existence?

IV. One thing for which I have earnestly pleaded is the abolition of clerical tests, which are in fact renunciations of absolute loyalty to truth. Would this involve the dissolution of the Churches? Nothing surely can put an end to the need of spiritual association or to the usefulness of the pastorate so long as we believe in spiritual life. I think I have seen the most gifted minds, such as might have done us the highest service in the quest of truth, condemned to silence by the tests.

May 5th, 1907.

VI.

THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL.

There appeared the other day in the Washington *Herald* a notable letter by Mr. Paul Chamberlain on Immortality. It took the same line as an essay on the same question by Mr. Chamberlain's late father, which I had read in manuscript. Both the letter and the essay are on the negative side of the question, which, in the essay at least, is pronounced the happier and better view, as conducive to unselfishness. Unselfishness, it must surely be, of a supreme kind. Annihilation is not a cheerful word. Bacon has a highly rhetorical passage flouting the fear of death. His was probably not a very loving nature, nor does he seem to have thought of the parting from those we love.

The life of the late Mr. Chamberlain was evidently happy as well as good. That of his son, I have no doubt, is the same. But of the lot of the myriads whose lives, through no fault of their own, are, or in the course of history have been, unhappy, often most miserable, what is to be said? If for them there is no compensation, can we believe that benevolence and justice rule the world? If the world is not ruled by benevolence and justice, what is our ground of hope?

The negative conclusion rids us, it is true, of the Dantean Hell, which paints the Deity as incomparably worse than the worst Italian tyrant, and, as it is to be everlasting, concedes the final victory to evil.

We discard all ghost stories and spiritualist apparitions as at most signs of a general craving. We resign all reasoning like that of Butler, who describes the soul as indiscernible, assuming that it exists separately from the body. Nor can we be said to have anything that bears the character of Revelation. That the Founder of

Christianity looked for a future life, with its rewards and punishments, is evident. But he brought no special message, lifted not the curtain of mystery, did nothing to clear our minds upon the subject. His apologue of Dives and Lazarus shows that to Him as to us the other world was a realm of the imagination.

Is there anything in man not physical, or apparently explained and limited by the transient conditions and necessities of his present state, anything which gives an inkling of immortality? Our utilitarian morality is the offspring and adjunct of our condition here. But is there not an aspiration to character which points to something more spiritual and higher than conformity to the utilitarian code? Heroism and self-sacrifice are not utilitarian.

We can hardly allow the investigation to be closed by the mere mention of the talismanic formulare Evolution. There may be something still to be said on that subject. Evolution cannot have evolved itself, nor does it seem capable of infallible demonstration. It no doubt postulates

vast spaces of time for its action. But within the space of time of which we in any way have knowledge, apparently no case of spontaneous evolution has taken place. Rudimentary likeness between the frame of the ape and that of man seems hardly in itself a proof of the generation of man from the ape.

On no subject, however, does one who is not a man of science or a philosopher feel more intensely his deficiency, and his need of having his paths lighted by the perfectly free while reverent inquiry, to pray for which has been the object of these letters.

August 11th, 1907.

VII.

IS THERE TO BE A REVOLUTION IN ETHICS?

A revolution in theology and in our conception of the government of the universe such as we are undergoing is sure to draw with it a revolutionary movement in ethics. There lies before me a review article giving an account of a number of books on ethics which are widely at variance, it appears, with the ethics of Christianity. The general tendency of the authors seems to be to reject altogether the Christian type of character as artificial and weak, and to aim at substituting for it something more robust and, it is assumed, more in accordance with nature. One theorist is represented as regarding humanity in its present form only as tran-

sient material out of which is to be wrought the “Superman.” In what respect, so far as our conceptions extend, has Christian ethic failed? It has given birth to the patriot as well as to the martyr, to the virtues of the softer as well as to those of the stronger sex. Communities which have kept its rules, as well as individuals, have been happy.

The Christian ideal of character and life went essentially unchanged through the violence of the Middle Ages and the vices of the Papacy. It was somewhat perverted by asceticism; but it was radically the same character in Anselm or in St. Louis, as it is in their counterparts now. Nor does it seem to lose by renunciation of theological dogma. The moral principles and aspirations of good free thinkers or Positivists remain still essentially Christian.

The ethical ideal which is now being set up against the Christian apparently is that of the Greeks. In literature and art Greece, or rather Athens, or, to speak still more correctly, a limited number of free

citizens in Athens, was pre-eminent: but its pre-eminence, if we may trust its own moralists, hardly extended to morals.

May 3rd, 1908.

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THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION.

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“I express myself,” says Bishop Butler, “with caution, lest I should be mistaken to vilify reason, which is, indeed, the only faculty which we have to judge concerning anything, even revelation itself; or be misunderstood to assert that a supposed revelation cannot be proved false from internal characters.” “The faculty of reason,” he says, “is the candle of the Lord within us against vilifying which we must be very cautious.”

What would the world be without religion? That is the dread question which seems now to be everywhere presenting itself. Would even the social fabric remain unshaken? Has not its stability partly depended on the general belief that

the dispensation, with all its inequalities, was the ordinance of the Creator, and that for inequalities here there would be compensation hereafter? The belief may not in common minds have been very present; but it would seem to have had its influence. Apparently, it is now departing. In some places it seems to have fled. Scepticism, with social unrest, comes in its room.

What is now the position of the clergy? Keepers and ministers of truth, as they are understood to be, they alone are debarred by ordination vows and tests from the free quest of truth. They are ecclesiastically bound not only to hold, but to teach and preach, as divinely revealed, what many of them must feel to have been disproved or to have become doubtful. Their uneasiness is shown by writings, such as "Lux Mundi," struggling to reconcile orthodoxy with free thought. It is shown by a growing tendency on the part of pastors to slide from the office of spiritual guide into that of leader of philanthropic effort and social reform. It is

seen, perhaps, even in the tendency to give increased prominence to musical attraction in the service. Sermons grow more secular.

Clerical biographies, such as that of Jowett, sometimes reveal private misgivings. The writer has even seen the pastorate of a large parish assumed by one who in private society was an evident rationalist and must have satisfied his conscience by promising to himself that he would do a great deal of social good. There is, no doubt, practically, more latitude than there was; heresy trials seem to have ceased, and one of the writers of “*Essays and Reviews*” became, without serious outcry, Primate of the Church of England. But ordination vows remain; so does the performance of a religious service which includes the repetition of creeds and forms a practical confession of faith. Hollow profession cannot fail to impair mental integrity, or, if generally suspected, to kill confidence in our guides. Read Canon Farrar’s “*Life of Christ*” and you will see to what shifts orthodoxy

puts a clerical writer who was, no doubt, a sincere lover of truth.

The religious disturbance shows itself at the same time in the prevalence of wild superstitions, such as Spiritualism, rising out of the grave of religious faith, and attesting the lingering craving for the supernatural, somewhat like the mysteries of Isis after the fall of national religion at Rome.

The crisis has come on us rather suddenly, in consequence partly of great physical discoveries. The writer as a young student heard Buckland struggling to reconcile geology with Genesis. Now the struggle is to reconcile Genesis with geology. Before this wonderful advance of science and criticism combined, there had been comparatively little of avowed, still less of popular, scepticism. Rousseau was a sentimental theist; Voltaire erected a church to God. This vast "Modernism," as the poor, quaking Pope rather happily calls the ascendancy of science and criticism, has changed all. It is conceivable that, now as on some former

occasions, the range of discovery may have been overrated and the pendulum of opinion may consequently have swung too far. Evolution, apparently, has still a wide space to traverse, even in what may be assumed to be the material sphere. What can it make of the marvellous stores of memory or of the apparently boundless play of the imagination, which by its working in sleep, sometimes with no assignable materials for the fancy, seems almost to show creative power?

Has Deity directly revealed itself to man? It has if the Bible is inspired. Otherwise, apparently, it has not. About the Koran or the Zendavesta it is hardly necessary to speak. “The Bible” we call the Old Testament and the New bound up together, as though they contained the two halves of the same dispensation and the moral ideal of both were the same. The historical importance of the Old Testament can hardly be overrated; nor can the literary grandeur of parts of it, or the advance made in social character and in law. When in connection with the ques-

tion of American slavery attention was specially directed to the social law of Moses, no careful reader could fail to be greatly struck by its advanced humanity and civilization. Nevertheless, the morality of the Old Testament is tribal, while that of the New Testament is universal. The tribal character of the Old Testament morality is seen in the destruction of the first-born in Egypt in order to force Pharaoh to let the Chosen People go; in the invasion of Canaan and the slaughter of the Canaanites; in the murder of Sisera; in the approval of the treason of Rahab; in David's putting to torture the inhabitants of a captured city. The attempt to reconcile all this with universal morality by styling it the course of "Evolution" can hardly avail, since the spirit of tribal separatism dominates in the latest books of the Old Testament, Ezra and Nehemiah, where Israelites are not only forbidden for the future to marry with Gentiles, but bidden to put away Gentile wives. It is true there are glimpses of a universal dominion of the God of Israel,

and of the happiness to be enjoyed by all nations under it. Still, Jehovah is Israel's God.

Were the Old Testament a Divine revelation it would certainly be free from error concerning the works of Deity, which plainly it is not. The narrative in Genesis of creation, compared with other primitive cosmogonies, is rational as well as sublime. But if Professor Buckland could persuade his hearers he could not persuade himself.

Largely good the influence of the Old Testament has no doubt been; largely also it prepared the way for the New. That its influence has been wholly good cannot be said. It has furnished fanaticism with aliment and excuse. It has found mottoes for the black flag of religious war.

Is it possible to believe, in face of doubtful authenticity, contradictions as to fact, and traces of local superstition, that the New Testament any more than the Old was dictated by Deity? Inspired by the creative power, in common with the other works of creative beneficence, as a part

of the general plan, the New Testament may have been. Its morality is not tribal, but universal. "God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth," this beside the well of Samaria by the Founder himself was proclaimed. If there is any privilege it is in favour not of race, but of class, the class being the poor, whose poverty seems counted to them as virtue, perhaps rather to the disparagement of active goodness.

Had the New Testament been divinely inspired, would not its authority have been clearly attested? Would not the authorship of its books have been made known? Would the slightest error or self-contradiction have been allowed to appear in it? What is the fact? The authenticity of a large portion of the Epistles of St. Paul seems admitted by critics; of other books of the New Testament the authorship is regarded as doubtful. The three Synoptic Gospels have a large element common to them all, and are evidently grafts upon a single document which is lost, and which the

critics generally seem inclined to place not earlier than the latter part of the first century. The Synoptics all tell us that when Jesus expired the veil of the Temple was rent. One adds that there was preternatural darkness; a third that the earth quaked, that the rocks were rent, that the graves opened, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, came out of the graves after the resurrection of Jesus, went into the holy city, and appeared to many. Such apparitions plainly must have produced an immense sensation; such a sensation, it may be assumed, as would have brought scepticism to its knees. This surely must be legendary, and the legend must have had time to grow.

Though grafts on the same original stock, the Gospels are often at variance with each other; as in the case of the genealogy of Jesus, upon which the harmonists labor in vain; in that of the marvels attending his birth; in that of his Last Supper; in that of the resurrection, which again baffles the skill of the har-

monists. Here, surely, is proof that the pens of the narrators were not guided by Omniscience.

Concerning the miracles of the casting out of devils generally, and in particular of the casting out of a legion of devils into a herd of two thousand swine at Gadara, what is to be said? Are these not clearly cases of human imagination set at work by a Jewish superstition? Is it possible that they should have had a place in a divine narrative of the life of the Saviour of the world? The Fourth Gospel omits them. Orthodoxy would fain persuade itself that this was to avoid unnecessary repetition.

Satan from the top of a mountain shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth. This seems to imply belief that the earth is a plane. The movement of the star of the Nativity seems to imply belief in the rotation of the heavens.

About the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, and, consequently, about its title to belief, there has been endless controversy among the learned. But there are

pretty plain indications, in the shape of the omission of demoniac miracles and some lack of local knowledge, that it is not the work of a Palestinian Jew. Opening with a reference to the Logos, it strikes the key of Alexandrian philosophy. It is, indeed, rather theological than historical, so that it has been not inaptly compared to the Platonic, in contrast to the Xenophontic, account of Socrates, the theology seems like that of a post-evangelical era. Martineau's conclusion is that "the only Gospel which is composed and not merely compiled and edited, and for which, therefore, a single writer is responsible, has its birthday in the middle of the second century, and is not the work of a witness at all." Historically, this Gospel is at variance with the others in its narrative of the Last Supper. "The incidents," says the highly orthodox Speaker's Commentary, "are parallel with sections of the Synoptic Gospels; but there are very few points of actual correspondence in detail between the narratives of the Synoptists and of St.

John.’’ There appears to have been much disputation among critics and commentators, but no room for disputation surely would have been left concerning narratives, equally authentic and inspired, of a momentous crisis in the life of the Saviour.

‘‘At this point, that is to say the beginning of the Galilean ministry, we are again met by difficulties in the chronology, which are not only various, but to the certain solution of which there appears to be no clue. If we follow exclusively the order given by one Evangelist we appear to run counter to the scattered indications which may be found in another. That it should be so will cause no difficulty to the candid mind. The Evangelists do not profess to be guided by chronological sequences.’’ So writes Dean Farrar in despair. Is it likely that such confusion would be found in a Divine revelation? Would not the narratives have been as well arranged and clear as, by the admission of orthodoxy, they are the reverse? Would the names of the authors of the

Gospels, their warrants and the sources of their information, have been withheld? Providence surely was not there.

If there was a miraculous revelation on which salvation depended, why was it not universal? Why has it all this time been withheld from nations even more in need of it than those to whom it was given? Are we to suppose that the salvation of these myriads was a matter of indifference to their Creator, or that Heaven preferred the slow and precarious working of the missionary to the instantaneous action of its own fiat? This is the question which scepticism asks, and which the great author of the “Analogy of Religion” fails to answer.

What did Jesus think of himself and his mission, and of his relation to Deity? This it seems impossible without more authentic records clearly to decide. The Gospel of St. John, which is the most theological, would appear to be the least trustworthy of the four. Its author, apparently, sees its subject through a theosophic medium of his own. The idea of

the teacher in the mind of the disciples would naturally rise with his ascendancy; so, perhaps, would his own idea. If Jesus is rightly reported he believed himself to be the Son of God, exalted to union and participation in spiritual dominion with the Father, and destined together with the Father to judge the world. But, in his mortal hour of anguish in Gethsemane, he prays to the Father to let the cup pass from him; an act hardly consistent with the doctrines of the Athanasian Creed. In the immortality of the soul and judgment after death he plainly believes. But he does not substantiate the belief by any explanation of the mode of survival; nor, in separating the two flocks of sheep and goats, does he say how mixed characters are to be treated. Tribalism seems slightly to cling to his conception of the just gathered in Abraham's bosom. Of his analogue of Dives and Lazarus, the last part appears to show that the world beyond the grave was to him a realm of the imagination.

The Sermon on the Mount would ap-

pear, by the strong impress of character it bears, to have special claims to authenticity. So may the Parables habitually employed as instruments of teaching and wearing apparently the stamp of a single imagination.

That with Jesus of Nazareth there came into the world, and by his example and teaching was introduced and propagated a moral ideal which, embodied in Christendom, and surviving through all these centuries the action of hostile forces the most powerful, not only from without, but from within, has uplifted, purified, and blessed humanity is a historical fact. With the civilization of Christendom no other civilization can compare. But we have been accustomed to believe that there was a miraculous revelation of the Deity. A revelation of the Deity, though not miraculous, Christianity may be believed to have been.

Revelation, direct and assured, of the nature, will, designs, or relation to us of the Deity through the Bible or in any other way we cannot be truly said to have.

All that we apparently can be said to have, besides the religious instinct in ourselves, is the evidence of beneficent design in the universe; balanced, we must sadly admit, by much that with our present imperfect knowledge appears to us at variance with beneficence; by plagues, earthquakes, famines, torturing diseases, infant deaths; by the sufferings of animals preyed on by other animals or breeding beyond the means of subsistence; by inevitable accidents of all kinds; by the Tower of Siloam everywhere falling on the just as well as on the sinner. There may be a key, there may be a plan, disciplinary or of some other kind, and in the end the mystery may be solved. At present there seems to be no key other than that which may be suggested by the connection of effort with virtue and the progress of a collective humanity.

At the same time, we may apparently dismiss belief in a great personal power of evil and in his realm of everlasting torture. The independent origin of such a power of evil is unthinkable; so is the

struggle between the two powers and its end. There is no absolutely distinct line between good and evil. The shades of character are numberless.

Another great change, rather of impression than of conviction, has been creeping over the religious scene. We have hitherto, largely, perhaps, under the influence of the Bible, been fancying rather than thinking that this little earth of ours was the centre of all things, the special object of interest to the Creator; and that the grand drama of existence was that enacted on this terrestrial stage and culminating in Redemption. Astronomical science is now making us distinctly feel that this world is only one, and, if magnitude is to be the measure, very far from the most important, of myriads of worlds governed by the same physical laws as ours, forming a system of which ours is a member, while the destiny of the whole system is to us utterly inscrutable; proofs of the most sublime and glorious order presenting themselves on the one hand, while on the other we see signs of disorder

and destruction, errant bodies such as comets and aerolites, a moon without an atmosphere, the conflagration of a star. Whether the whole is moving towards any end and, if it is, what that end is to be, we cannot hope to divine. When with Infinity we take into our thought Eternity, past and future, if in Eternity there can be said to be past or future, our minds are completely overwhelmed.

Is belief in a future life generally holding its ground? My friend, the late Mr. Chamberlain, was by no means alone in resigning it. But if this life is all, how can we continue to hold our faith in divine justice? Mr. Chamberlain, as I said before, was evidently happy as well as good. His life, though short and regarded by him as ending in the grave, was to him so much gain, and proved beneficence on the part of the Author of his being. But if Mr. Chamberlain's theory is true, what is to be said in the case of the myriads to whom life has been wretchedness, ending perhaps in agony, often without the slightest responsibility on their part?

For these unhappy ones would it be well, as Mr. Chamberlain holds it was for him, that there should be no hereafter? Is their being brought into existence only to suffer compatible with our faith in supreme benevolence? Is confidence in supreme justice compatible with the conviction that the tyrant and the tortured victims of his tyranny, alike, repose forever in the grave? Such, it is true, was the belief of the Hebrew; indication of any other belief, at all events, he has left us none, unless it be a faint glimpse of Sheol. The philosophy of Job halts accordingly. The Hebrew believed that he would be rewarded or punished in his posterity.

Bishop Butler's grand argument for belief in the possibility of a future life goes upon the supposition that our conscious personality is distinct and separable from our perishable frame, and is in itself "indiscerptible," so that there is no reason why it should not survive the death of the body. To prove that it ever has survived the death of the body, or to show the

mode of its survival, the Bishop does not attempt. But Butler lived long before Evolution and the general advance of physiology in these later days. Johnson, who was no sceptic, owned that he yearned for more light on the “spiritual world,” by which he apparently meant immortality.

Positivism tenders us endless existence as particles in a collective humanity, the “colossal man.” But would there be much satisfaction in existence when individuality and personal consciousness had been lost? Would the prospect lead the ordinary man to work and suffer for generations to come, at all events, for any beyond the circle of the immediate objects of his love? What the end of the colossal man is to be seems undetermined. The Positivist Church has produced very good and beautiful lives, but its power as a religion to go alone would be more clearly seen were not Christianity at its side.

Is there or is there not after all something in human nature apparently unsus-

ceptible of physical explanation and seeming to point to the possibility of a higher state of being? Evolution may ultimately explain our general frame, emotional and intellectual, as well as physical. It may in time explain the marvels of imagination and memory. It may explain our æsthetic nature with our music and art. It may explain even our social and political frame and our habit of conformity to law. But beyond conformity to law, social or political, is there not, in the highest specimens of our race at least, a conception of an ideal of character and an effort to rise to it which seem to point to a more spiritual sphere?



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